

# THE BLACK PEARL

Entry No. 8 in Our Prize Story Competition

BY MICHAEL WHITE



On His Check Fell a Zephyr of Breath.



IT WAS the real India Townsend wanted to see, which is a different thing from the neatly dovetailed route sketched out for you in the New York office of a travel bureau. The last usually means a safe and easy trip with guaranteed rail and hotel accommodations of a sort; the first is a risk no properly conducted accident insurance company should take.

Therefore, behold Townsend eating goat chops in a hall that would have appropriately served for a King's public banquet, save that Indian Kings invariably feast in private. He had witnessed the neat slicing off of the goat's head an hour before by the old khansamah, or keeper of the place, and was at the moment seeing a tourist untrod corner of Rajputana by the light of one smoky kerosene lamp. Whereof strange painted figures looked down on him out of an ornately decorated frieze sinking into an immensity of shadow, and a damp, chill air filtered through window screens of marble fretwork, exquisite in design but incentive to fever. Be it observed that Townsend had somewhat forcibly taken lodging in what remained of a palace discarded by the Maharanas of Chanzi, and given over to the degraded and seldom requisitioned usefulness of a state dak bungalow, or traveler's rest house. No secret was made that strangers were unwelcome in Chanzi, and it was only Townsend's American persistence that had gained him shelter under that lordly ruinous roof.

The new Palace of Chanzi—merely three or four hundred years old—was built upon terraces carved and scraped out of precipitous rock, with the walled city lying in its shadow. Local rumor had it that the new and old palaces were connected by an underground passage in case hasty flight became necessary, also—and this was spoken of in a whisper—it had been used for more than one romantic adventure; but of such matters Townsend was uninformed while taking stock of the vastness of his apartment. It was like being assigned to the waiting room of a terminal railway station after midnight when the train schedule is marked by long intervals, and with a single candlepower for illuminating purposes.

WHEN the Sahib condescends to honor this place again with his presence," chattered the old khansamah, hovering over Townsend with his tulwar, which had snipped off the goat's head, stuck in his waistband.

"Um—yes, when he does?" questioned Townsend dubiously.

"There shall be fowls and eggs worthy of his exalted patronage. As it is, if there is anything more the Presence wishes—"

"I guess he won't get it," put in Townsend; "but he might like to know where he sleeps."

"Wherever the Sahib pleases," answered the khansamah; "though the bed which this slave has prepared and screened with mosquito net has evidently escaped his Honor's notice."

Townsend's gaze followed the khansamah's arm, extended toward a dark corner of the hall, where a kind of recess was formed by the joining of two architraves at right angles above a column. By straining his vision he was able to distinguish a tent arrangement which served as the best quarters he might hope for in a half ruined palace.

"All right," he nodded. "I—I presume," he added reflectively, "I am not likely

to be disturbed by visitors during the night? This place could hardly be called private, with half a dozen entrances."

"Sir," replied the khansamah, "few people come here. Should the Sahib not sleep well, he will be pleased to remember that he forced his way in with a stick."

"Well, I had to get in somehow," remarked Townsend, "as I was told it was the only resemblance to a hotel in this God forsaken town. Guess I'll have to make the best of it. But you needn't worry about my return."

"Those who come here seldom return," muttered the khansamah under his breath. "They are fortunate if they do not go hence to Gehenna. But it is none of my business. Did he not force his way in with a stick? The Sahib is never happy unless beating his head with a stone."

The khansamah presently went away into parts unknown, and Townsend stretched himself on the apology for a bed, permitting his eyes to wander into the shadowy vastness of his unique sleeping room. It was certainly the real India! Elsewhere people do not dine on goat chops, served by an innkeeper wearing a handy sword, and with space enough at their disposal to fit the convenience of an elephant. From this seeming incongruity of things his thoughts drifted backward over the mail tonga ride that had brought him thither, to center on the entertaining terrors of a fat Bengali fellow traveler, who was certain the Rajput guard was a thug in disguise. He knew all about thugs, did the fat Bengali, and his fearsome talk ran in Townsend's fading mental grasp:

Was the Sahib going to Chanzi? Very bad people in that place—yas! Did the Sahib observe that the Rajput guard had one eye? That was a bad sign—yas! Was the Sahib not aware that one eye had more than twice the power of two eyes for evil—yas! Let the Sahib be careful of engaging a servant with one eye. Perhaps the Sahib would condescend to look again and see if that cutthroat of a Rajput had one or two eyes. (Couldn't make out for the dust.) How many eyes, though, had that old blockhead of a khansamah? One eye? Nonsense! Two eyes? Of course! Certainly! Mighty tough goat chops— Bully clean stroke of old khansamah's tut-tulwar. Yes, that was it, tulwar. . .

Ensued then a period of mental blank.

TOWNSEND was roused to wakefulness by a peculiarly strong fishbone-in-the-throat kind of cough. He looked out through the mosquito curtain, to see that moonlight streaming in through the fern pattern tracery of the marble screens had replaced the dusky illumination of the lamp, and objects formerly indistinct now stood forth in pale, fantastic relief. Again that powerful cough, this time suggesting affectation more than fishbone. Townsend's gaze swept in the direction the sound came from, and fell upon an entirely unlooked for family party.

A superb tigress was the leader. As she paced across in a full stream of light from a broken window screen, her black velvet ribbons marked a Parisian contrast to the unburnished gold of her body. She carried her massive head proudly, and swung her tail with the sinuous grace of her tribe. Clinging to her flanks trotted two half grown cubs inclined to frolic. The tigress moved to the table on which Townsend's supper had been served, stretched her head over it, and became interested in the remnants of the goat chops.

Townsend watched from the recess, and began to put himself questions. First, what had become of the khansamah? He wished the old fellow would test the suppleness of his wrist and tulwar on the tigress's neck. Perhaps she had eaten the khansamah? In that case, she would hardly retain an appetite for goat chops. He noticed that she tossed scraps to her cubs, and he admired her motherly solicitude; but he had no wish to assist personally in that natural duty. If she discovered him, what would he do? It occurred to him forcibly that a mosquito net was an entirely insufficient barrier between him and a tigress, anxious to provide food for her family. If possible, it was clearly best to escape.

He slipped noiselessly from the bed on the farther side and backed deeper into the recess. But, though he imagined he moved with the silence of a ghost, the keen ears of the tigress were kindled into a sense of alarm. She lifted her great head, and the pale light shone on its black and white marks, touching with silver her delicate, sharp pointed whiskers. Opalescent fires flashed in her wide searching eyes. Townsend had never posed as a statue; but his rigid tenseness of limb and muscle would have won praise from an artist. For a minute, possibly some seconds over, the tigress glared toward Townsend; while somehow Townsend was impressed with the idea what a prize she would be—behind very strong bars.

Perhaps she at first took him for the stone effigy of a Hindu god; but in any case it was not a lasting deception. She sniffed the air suspiciously, and emitted a low growl which vibrated to the uttermost ends of the hall. Then she sank her head and began to creep forward after the manner of a cat stalking a sparrow. Meanwhile, the two cubs sat on their haunches to watch the fun of mother playing tag with the man Sahib. But Kismet cut short the game.

AS the tigress shot in the air, Townsend made for a pillar more in the open. The tigress, missing her mark, came down with a snarl on the mosquito net, entangling her claws in its mesh. This gave Townsend a chance to reach a spot where he thought he had seen the old khansamah enter. Instead he fell on a dummy stone panel which caved in before his impetus, and he went down a funnel shaped hole apparently reaching into the depths of the earth.

In his descent Townsend threw out his arms wildly and clutched at a winding ladder of narrow steps cut in the smooth surface of the rock. At the first attempt he missed a grip, and went scrambling down until his foot struck a light projecting ledge. Another grab at the steps above his head, and he hung there for an instant. In an effort to gain a balance he threw his body inward, to discover the aperture of a low arch. In a few seconds he was sitting on the ledge with his feet dangling in nothingness. From far below rose with cavernous echo the splash and gurgle of running water, and from above descended a muffled roar, presumably from the disappointed tigress.

It was borne in upon Townsend that he was in wonderful luck to have escaped two such fatalities; then, on drawing in a foot, not entirely fortunate. He became instantly aware of excruciating pain in his ankle. Such cursory examination as he was able to make suggested a bad sprain from contact with the ledge. His next move was hardly a matter of doubt. If able to climb the well, her Stripeship might be waiting for him at its mouth, while only suicide was to be gained by attempting further descent.

Therefore, crawling into the arch, he rose to a stooping posture, and limped along



a passage, groping his way in the darkness by a hand laid on the side wall. That passage seemed of interminable length. Moreover, it climbed continually by steep ascents and flights of curving steps. As Townsend hopped and dragged his injured foot over the uneven surface, he wondered if the outlet was on top of a mountain. Twinges of pain several times compelled him to halt, the tomblike atmosphere was stifling; so that fear of being trapped in such a rathole became the chief stimulus urging him forward.

At last he dragged himself up on a platform. Before him a door barred further progress. But from under the door streamed a faint white light. Also soft laughing voices smote upon his ear; above the others one compelling voice particularly singing a refrain to the accompaniment of a tinkling instrument. Evidently night had been turned into day in that region. Townsend had reached a condition of physical suffering and exhaustion when the propriety of intruding on feminine society was beyond consideration. He raised his hands and beat upon the door. The voices beyond ceased suddenly, and his imagination pictured startled expressions. Again he beat upon the door, calling for assistance. Followed then a pause. Townsend repeated his summons. Presently a bolt was drawn, grating in a ponderous lock, and the door swung open.

THEN swept upon his dazed vision a flood of silver light illuminating a small open court fashioned after the manner of a marvelously carved ivory jewel casket; also the flutter of subtle hued draperies, a sparkle of gems, and a glimpse of wondering faces. He reached aside to steady himself, failed to grasp a support, reeled, and dropped across the threshold. He had stumbled on a sight not guaranteed for the beaten track across India.

A pleasant feeling of drowsy semiwakefulness was the next experience recalled by Townsend. His sense of touch conveyed the impression of reposing on soft material. Across his face swept a light current of perfumed air, and in his ears the distant trill of bird notes; also two persons conversing in a whisper. The pain had left his ankle, which appeared to have been deftly bandaged.

He opened his eyes, to discover himself in a curious stone walled chamber, which, in a half light, revealed a paneling of innumerable cubes and squares of tiny mirrors, partly concealed by silken draperies. In one side above his head was an iron barred and shuttered window, screening the glare from without. But the ceiling! As his gaze became fixed on it, he was in doubt if he was not still in a dream, and the realistic portrayal of birds, insects, flowers, and climbing monkeys a trick of the imagination. In a little the whispering conversation ended. A jingle of bangles was followed by a tiptoe step on the mosaic floor.

Townsend expectantly waited. Then he stared up into a pair of eyes that for depth of mysterious feeling he had never before encountered. A little startled scream, the hasty veiling of a lovely face, and the captivating apparition drew quickly back. Townsend raised himself on his elbow to catch a glimpse of the flight of a graceful figure into a dark passage, and to meet a warning look on the wrinkled features of a very old woman. She came forward with a finger laid significantly on her lips. When at his side she spoke in hushed accents.

"Does the Sahib wish for anything?"

"Well," replied Townsend, beginning to arrange things in his mind, "first he would like to know what place this is."

"The zenana of the Maharana Rao Bahadur," she answered with a fearsome tremor in her voice.

"Oh, ye gods! Is that so!" he responded, putting points of surprise to his words. "And that young lady I saw here a moment ago, who is she?" he inquired.

"The Lady Indrapura Sahiba, daughter of the Maharana."

"Great Heavens!" exclaimed Townsend. "I seem to have stumbled into a pretty nest. But tell me—"

"The Sahib must not speak so loud," faltered the old woman. "If he be discovered here, then shall we all have our choice between the well and the tigress."

"So that is her Stripeship's business!" remarked Townsend. "I must say she makes a mighty fine watchdog for the Maharana's back door."

"The Sahib had better eat now," said the old woman; "but he must promise not to stir from this place while I go to procure him food. The Lady Indrapura has put all our feet in the fire by concealing him here. Some day the Maharana will find out; then—"

The old woman cast up her hands as she moved to a

door inlaid with ivory and mother of pearl, and Townsend lay back to consider the situation. It was interesting, mightily so; but manifestly dangerous. He was aware that Maharanas and such folk have a worldwide reputation for being peculiarly jealous of their zenana precincts. He rather doubted if a sprained ankle would be accepted as sufficient excuse for his presence in that gilded cage. Neither did he quite see how the Lady Indrapura, she of the ravishing eyes, could well offer pity as the sole reason for his concealment. Clearly, personal safety would have prompted him to enlist the old woman's assistance in hopping out of the place; but he was sorely tempted for another look, just one more glance from those eyes. (That additional glance has been the undoing of several men in other parts of the world than Chanzi.)

Thus, when the old woman returned with appetizing dishes, spiced and seasoned to satisfy an oriental epicure's palate, he rejected her advice to take flight while the hour of safety remained. Instead he plied her with questions regarding the Lady Indrapura. In this way he learned that the Maharana, having been unhappily married in childhood, had decided he would not force a husband on his daughter without her consent. Of late he had favored a certain noble, the Thakur of Hondal; but Indrapura had inspected him from behind a screen in the hall of public audience, and for reasons best known to herself objected.

That was her position when Townsend fell upon the zenana threshold, and it stirred in him a further desire for another meeting with his captivating hostess. Since by chance he was in for an adventure, the spice of it appealed to his American spirit. Therefore, he decided to make the best of his sprained ankle by continuing an inactive treatment.

But Indrapura did not reappear; neither did she re-

sound; but on his cheek presently fell a zephyr of breath, and on his forehead that which was like unto the touch of a butterfly's wing. By her gods! it was a kiss! For Townsend to have restrained himself further would have been more than human. He half rose and threw out an arm, to encircle a slender waist. The cry of surprise that escaped her lips broke into one of positive terror, which Townsend thought was hardly warranted by the circumstances; at least until, following her frightened stare, he saw in the door a figure which instinct made known to him, the Maharana Ram Sivaji Rao Bahadur.

NOW witness how the Oriental proceeds in such cases. Did the Maharana straightway heap wrath on the guilty pair? Not at all! Not by the pucker of an eyebrow did he disclose his knowledge of the seal of devotion. That would have been utterly beneath his dignity. Instead he gravely recognized his daughter, and addressed Townsend in a tone of usual politeness, an attendant translating.

"I have been told," thus he gave evidence of some one's treachery, "that you have met with an accident. That is to be regretted. By chance following my daughter hither, I find her performing an act of charity in ministering to your misfortune. I hope you will soon recover."

Townsend breathed more freely. The Maharana's greeting did not impress him as burdened with implacable vengeance. If formal, it was not unfriendly. Certainly worse might have been expected had Indrapura's father been an American. He therefore thanked the Maharana in appropriate terms, and inwardly Providence for what he imagined had escaped the Maharana's notice.

Without trace of emotion the Maharana made suitable acknowledgment, and departed as he came. Townsend looked at Indrapura, still in some doubt how to interpret her father's manner. There was none on her part. She trembled like the leaf of a bo tree in a light wind, and presently sank down beside him in an attitude of despair.

"Ahi, Sahib!" she cried. "This is the end! No more can be said!"

"What end?" questioned Townsend, endeavoring to reassure her with a caress. "Your father did not seem to have noticed anything wrong."

"Ah, heart, light of my heart! You do not understand the ways of our people. I know how different; for I had an English memsahib teacher. And I—it is I who have brought you to your death!"

"Death!" he repeated. "Not by your fault, and we have not reached that end yet. There ought to be some way of getting out of this place. Where is that old woman, your ayah? She might help us."

He rose, went to the door, and looked out into the dark passage. It ran at right angles to the chamber. A glance in both directions confirmed his companion's fear. An armed guard had been stationed to cut off any attempt to escape. Townsend tried to engage them in conversation; but they were as dumb as statues. There was no doubt that the Princess and himself had been made prisoners.

He returned to her side, endeavoring to assume an optimistic spirit in circumstances that looked decidedly threatening. They sat together waiting in suspense for the unknown to happen, the sentence that probably had already been decided. Among other things, Townsend realized that, although a more powerful flag than the Maharana's waved over the land, it was impotent to render assistance to anyone venturing within an Indian Prince's zenana walls. His chief concern, though, was for his companion, and he shuddered more at thought of her fate than his own. Minutes dragged into hours; at least so it seemed. Once or twice Townsend reconnoitered the passage; but on each occasion found the guards at their posts.

At last the light began to fade in the shuttered casement, and shadows stole in upon them like phantoms. One golden beam shot across the frescoed ceiling, heralding the end of day, then black darkness fell. She drew closer to him; so again they waited.

AT length heavy steps woke the echoes of the passage, and a torchlight shone along its path. As it grew into an illuminating flame, Townsend raised the Princess's lips to his own, and took her hand in a firm grasp.

Presently an officer of the Maharana's household entered. He cast a veil over the Princess, and beckoned

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He Took the Goblet and Drained Its Deadly Contents.

spond otherwise than formally to his messages. For two days he waited in growing impatience, until a secret was disclosed. He found a jeweled rosette detached from the tip of a dainty slipper near the head of his couch. He guessed she paid him stolen visits when he was asleep. If so, it was a pretty game at which two could play. He decided to adopt the part of a dreamer in an afternoon siesta, as the saying is, with one eye open. For sometime he listened to the twittering of birds enjoying the freedom of life outside that prison of splendor, he was conscious that the old waiting woman came and went several times muttering to herself, and then—then it happened!

Though watching with both ears, he detected no



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merely picturing it to myself in my imagination, was I impressed with the fact that a hanging could never be made laughable on the stage—unless in sheer burlesque. Hanging, basically, is in itself too unpleasant a subject. If I had been told that the scene would never go, I should not have believed it. One can never tell these things from the mere reading of one's manuscripts.

### His Serious Scenes Were Comedy

THESE are only a few of my strange adventures in stageland, some of the main ones and some that will best reveal to others the way the game is played. There were many, many others. There was the adventure with the Boston audience, for example, which laughed out loud at one of my beloved serious scenes in "The Intruder," whereupon Mr. Brady exclaimed "Fine!"

"Are you kidding me?" I asked him.  
"Not at all," he replied. "That'll make a great comedy scene. Comedy is what they want."

And I changed my serious scenes into comedy scenes.

Then, too, there was the adventure with the first lazy stenographer who typed my early efforts and assured me that play type-writing was her regular occupation, and that no act should ever exceed twenty typed pages. And I believed her.

## THE BLACK PEARL

the two to follow. As they passed from the chamber guards closed in upon them, thus preventing an attempt at resistance. In this way they were conducted through long, winding passages, across courts and miniature gardens, until they were ushered into a great paved hall and upon a scene suggestive of the European Middle Ages.

By the light of torches held in massive silver brackets, Townsend beheld the Maharana seated on a gold and ivory throne. He was surrounded by his personal nobles, wearing plumed caps engraved with Vedic texts and characters, and garbed in coats of chain mail. At intervals along the walls the bodyguards of the Maharana stood like effigies of bronze. Banners and arms hung upon the silken sheen of matchless rugs, gleaming in arabesque patterns of azure, old rose, deep red, white, black, and turquoise. When Townsend was brought before the Maharana a profound silence fell. Presently the Maharana spoke.

"For this which has happened there is no precedent to be found in the annals of the House of Chanzi. Therefore, there is no rule by which it can be settled. Yet it is impossible that my daughter remain unmarried. In that she has lost her own word which I had granted. For the honor of the House of Chanzi, my kinsman, the Thakur Sahib of Hondal, has accepted her for his wife. For his own honor he asks that he be permitted to swallow the Black Pearl. As everyone knows, the Black Pearl contains a subtle poison. This being agreed upon, my daughter will follow the ancient custom of sacrificing herself at his funeral ceremonies, in return for his generosity, and to serve him faithfully in the other world. Thus will her honor be saved and her crime expiated."

WHEN the significance of these words reached Townsend's understanding he was seized with horror. He took an impulsive step forward; but the Maharana stayed him with a gesture. He beckoned to a bearer, who presented a gold salver, on which stood a crystal goblet containing an amber liquid. The Maharana took from his purse a pear shaped pearl of jet black luster, poised it for a moment over the goblet, and dropped it into the amber liquid. A slight effervescence followed, when the liquid took on the tint of aquamarine. The Maharana then addressed Townsend:

"For your part in this matter all that is required is a small service. Then you may go wherever you will at your own pleasure. It is for you to hand this goblet to the Thakur."

Townsend drew back appalled at the request. Great Heavens! it meant handing the Princess over to an unthinkable death! It was impossible. He had rather die himself.

"Do you refuse so trifling a satisfaction to her honor, you who have taken her in your embrace?" questioned the Maharana.

Townsend was about to refuse, when, realizing that such would probably in no wise help matters, he grasped at an expedient which might at least save the Princess.

"Your Highness," he replied, "has the power to order as you please in this place. I guess that little which passes within these

It is a humorous game, if you look at it in the right way. But it is one of the greatest and most interesting in all the professional world. Playwriting offers a fair field to every man who wants to enter it, and if he has the stuff in him he will surely succeed. As in everything else, the road is strange and rough; but there are few really unfair ambushes, and the goal brings ample remuneration and happiness.

Among the things I have learned while traveling the road are never to "say die." Smile at hard luck and blame it to no one but your own self; and realize that your play, if rejected, is after all probably not so good as you think it is. I have learned too that to be able to write comedy a man must have been "up against it"—he must know the other side. I have learned that to write satire one must love life, and live life, and grin in the face of gloom and trouble. I have learned that self confidence is the greatest asset in the world. I have learned that it never pays nor will pay to imitate. In imitating, you admit that the other fellow is better than you are. I have learned that any man who can write a good play will be able to find a producer for that play. I have learned not to be bitter in one's writing; but to look on the cheerful, sunny side of the picture always. And I have learned that Kentuckians always stick together!

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walls escapes to the knowledge of the outer world. Therefore, it would be useless to protest, or to plead the happier rule by which other people are guided. I will hand the Black Pearl to the Thakur."

In stretching forth his hand for the goblet, he thought he heard a sigh of infinite pain and regret escape from the lips of Princess Indrapura. She perhaps thought better of him than to abandon her for the price of his own life. From time of old it was not the way of the Rajputs. He took the goblet from the Maharana; but, instead of approaching the Thakur, turned quickly toward the Princess. He raised the goblet above her head as if in a benediction, then drained the contents. With a sweep of his arm he hurled the goblet to the pavement, smashing it into a thousand splinters.

NOW," he cried facing the Maharana, "I stand in the Thakur's place! I claim your daughter for my wife, the honor being all on my head! I also claim, by all the laws of my people, that, whether my death takes place in five minutes or five years, as my widow she be permitted to act as she pleases. I have been told," he added, turning to the grim visaged nobles, "that the Rajputs are a chivalrous people of Saracen blood. I appeal to the chivalry of their race!"

A murmur of approval ran through the half circle gathered about the Maharana. Meanwhile the Maharana divested his neck of a rope of kingly pearls.

"Be it so," he gravely inclined his head. He motioned Townsend and the Princess to advance. When they stood before him, he bound their hands together with the rope of pearls. "By this act," he said, "you are now joined together in life and death."

Followed then a pause as if there remained something unspoken. It was Townsend who broke the silence.

"Since I presume I have but a short time to live, your Highness will understand there are words I would like to say to my wife in private."

The Maharana looked down on Townsend and smiled in a fatherly, almost genial manner. Then his expression grew serious. "Listen!" he stretched forth a hand. "I have judged in this fashion. Because you met my eyes fearlessly when I first came upon you, I did not condemn you on the instant. But even so there are men who would swear they loved my daughter in all honor to escape the consequences of your act, while in their hearts would be a lie blacker than the pearl you have taken. Therefore I did not ask. There are also pariahs in the forms of men who would sacrifice a woman to save their own accursed skins. It was necessary that your affection and courage should be proved. Had you handed the pearl to the Thakur, he would have killed you at one stroke. As it is, go in peace and happiness. On this occasion the Black Pearl was but an imitation containing a harmless substance. Thou too art of the Rajput build! Lo! I have spoken!"

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